

## The Grades Are In

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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The grades are in and if you care to put any faith in them, then the Cleveland Browns didn't have such a great draft after all.

So-called experts, from Tony Grossi at the Plain Dealer, and Jarrett Bell at USA Today, and nearly every other NFL writer with access to a laptop in between has offered up an opinion on the Browns' draft and at best it's drawing mediocre reviews.

Yet as I review the reviews I can't find a unifying underlying reason for the collective shoulder shrugs. By all measures, the Browns addressed their needs. No one has much negative to say about Joe Haden or T.J. Ward. There seems agreement, generally, that Colt McCoy could be a steal in the third round. At most it seems that the Browns' are being downgraded because their draft wasn't particularly glamorous, as if glamour equals great. If it did, Paris Hilton would have won an academy award by now.

If any of this worries you, it shouldn't. Putting stock in the grades handed out by reporters who

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got nearly every pick wrong in their own mock drafts is like putting your faith in Jhonny Peralta to drive in a meaningful run. Do it at the risk of your own mental well being.

Let's dispense with the context. The NFL draft is all about guessing which college players who have never played a NFL game in their lives will be able to make one of the most difficult transitions in professional sports. Grading the NFL draft is about guessing which teams made the best guesses without, you know, actually yet seeing the results on the field.

If you looked at the USA Today on Monday, Bell graded the Seattle Seahawks as an A+. Yet when you bother to read why, you find that it is based more on Bell's man-love for Pete Carroll than anything else.

Carroll's been on the job in Seattle for a few months now after getting out of southern California apparently one step ahead of the plodding justice meted out by the NCAA. Carroll was just following the lead of a few of his players, like Reggie Bush, that did likewise.

But Carroll is well liked. He's accessible to the media. He's rah rah. He's also been a dismal failure in the NFL in two previous stints and until he actually proves otherwise in his latest job with the Seahawks, simply succeeding at USC isn't going to erase that record.

In this past weekend's draft, Carroll drafted a left tackle, a safety and a receiver. A left tackle, assuming it's the correct left tackle, is always a good safe pick. NFL writers like to praise teams for taking left tackles while resisting more glamorous opportunities.

Joe Thomas was an excellent pick for the Cleveland Browns a few seasons ago as he immediately became an offensive line fixture and a Pro Bowler as well. But I don't think anyone in retrospect would give Phil Savage an A+ for that draft now, especially as Brady Quinn tries to find himself in Denver.

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The same thing ultimately will apply to the Seahawks' pick of Russell Okung. The Seahawks may indeed have gotten the worthy successor to Walter Jones, who is retiring, but simply taking Okung at the moment hardly qualifies the Seahawks for such sweeping praise.

For the Seahawks, it will come down to how safety Earl Thomas and receiver Golden Tate perform in the years to come. If they and Okung become Pro Bowl fixtures then the draft will indeed have been an A+. But for now the grade seems a tad premature, doesn't it?

You could pick apart Bells' grades on every other team similarly.

Bell gave the Browns a C+ grade on their draft but there's nothing in his write-up that actually suggests why. Indeed if you read it Bell makes it seem like the Browns did everything right.

Reading between the lines, the main criticism leveled by Bell and others who seem lukewarm toward the Browns has to do with the injury histories of a few of their draft picks.

The NFL is a rough sport and at some point in every player's career an injury will occur. The question is whether T.J. Ward, for example, is more prone to injuries because of those he suffered in college. But is that true?

The best you can do, really, is trust that the guys making the decisions, general manager Tom Heckert and team president Mike Holmgren, have competent enough medical advisors who actually can make an educated guess about the issue.

Now if it turns out that Heckert and Holmgren defied the opinions of team doctors who examined Ward and looked at his medical past, that's one thing. But for now there's no reason to believe anything like that occurred so downgrading the Browns' draft on that basis doesn't make much sense.

The obvious truth is that there is absolutely no way to know how the draft will turn out for the

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Browns or any other team for that matter. But that won't stop the grading game anyway.

What makes all this even more ludicrous is that it's not as if those doing the grades have any superior knowledge on the topic.

Covering the NFL may give you a leg up on the average schmo in terms of understanding the pro game but it doesn't exactly make you an expert on college football or its players. It's like having a college professor grade your kid's performance in middle school because he looked at one of his 8<sup>th</sup> grade mid-term reports on ancient Rome.

At this point, the only realistic grades worth offering for any team are of the pass/fail variety. The best way to do this is just to determine whether your team went wildly off the rails. Did it ignore its own needs in favor of fliers? Did it take a player no one has ever heard of?

It's worth noting that under that measure the Browns drafts of seasons past got passing grades and yet in retrospect few if any of those drafts were particularly productive.

The Browns of this year similarly get a passing grade. The Browns had some obvious needs in the defensive secondary and addressed them. They have a gaping need at quarterback and addressed that. They were somewhat weak at running back and addressed that. In other words, the Browns went after the players you'd pretty much expect them to go after.

That doesn't mean that every pick will turn out well. Indeed it's highly unlikely that all 8 draft picks will even make the team. The same, though, goes for every other team, mainly because there are less openings than applicants.

Which is the point anyway. It may make somebody in Seattle feel good to know that Bell gave the team an A+ in April, but the real test is whether two Aprils from now it will still look that way. Rarely they do.